

A portrait of a man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white shirt and a dark V-neck sweater. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a textured, mossy rock wall.

EUGENE WEEKLY'S 2013 GUIDE TO

OBF

OREGON BACH FEST

SPOTLIGHT:
NICHOLAS
PHAN

FAREWELL TO
Helmuth Rilling

OBF
Events Schedule
& Highlights

COMPOSER SYMPOSIUM
A Look Forward & Bach

Rilling's Swan Song

BY BRETT CAMPBELL

OBF CO-FOUNDER HELMUTH RILLING

Along with the usual joy afforded by hearing some of history's greatest music, this summer's Oregon Bach Festival will be tinged with some sadness. It marks the end of co-founder Helmuth Rilling's 43-year run as artistic director of the festival he created, with fellow legend Royce Saltzman, in 1970. Although he remained based in Stuttgart, Germany, home of his International Bach Academy, Rilling probably did more to put Oregon on the world's classical music map than any other single figure. Several of this summer's events will deservedly be devoted to celebrating the 80-year-old Rilling's enormous musical contributions to the state, the city and the University of Oregon (OBF's parent institution).

Rilling's value even transcends Oregon. While most of us think of the Bach Festival as a performance series, in fact it's also an educational institution that began as a small workshop in choral conducting and organ playing and has continued as one of the country's most important incubators of choral conducting talent.

"The most important thing for me personally and for the idea of our festival is the teaching," Rilling told *Oregon Quarterly* this year. "Thousands of people have been taught choral conducting in Eugene. The conducting class over the years with so many conductors gave the Oregon Bach Festival great influence on the choral musical life of the United States."

The smooth, extended transition from Rilling to his successor, British conductor/keyboard player Matthew Halls, has been under way since Rilling announced his retirement

in 2010 and the university chose Halls as his successor the following year. Both conducted concerts — some featuring the same works, but in their different styles — at last summer's festival and in 2011. This year will feature another shared concert that will constitute a kind of symbolic baton-passing.

Rilling will continue to teach and conduct at the festival he founded, and to maintain his vigorous international touring schedule for as long as he's able. Meanwhile, Halls, who takes over when this festival ends, will continue the festival's welcome evolution toward a more up-to-date style of historically informed performance, usually on instruments or replicas from the period in which the music was composed. Though Rilling's own performance practices did evolve along with scholarly rediscoveries, they still often featured anachronistically large choirs, tunings and modern instruments. Those performances, however accomplished, lacked the vitality, clarity and authenticity of those recently made by the world's other Baroque specialists — including the Portland Baroque Orchestra, which OBF executive director John Evans has brought into the OBF for the past few years.

Still, the Eugene-based festival seems likely to maintain the essential identity Rilling helped give it: a vital hybrid of performances and educational efforts devoted to the music of Bach, the Baroque and beyond. In that sense, it will always be as much about Helmuth Rilling as about Bach, and for that, fans can show their gratitude and appreciation during this summer's swan song.



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Phantastic Voyage

TENOR **NICHOLAS PHAN** EXPLORES OREGON AND BRITTEN

BY BRETT CAMPBELL

In Valentine's Day in 2009, the young opera singer Nicholas Phan was standing in his New York kitchen when the phone rang. His manager was calling to tell him that a colleague had just canceled his performance, which Helmuth Rilling was leading that night at Carnegie Hall. Could Phan fill in? Well, he replied, he had sung the role in Haydn's mighty oratorio *The Creation* before — but it was eight years ago, and he'd sung it only in English. That night's performance was to be in German. Nevertheless, he grabbed his score and agreed to give it a shot. A few hours later, he was at Carnegie, auditioning for Rilling. Expecting to sing only a single aria, he wound up singing through the entire score. "That audition turned out to be our rehearsal," Phan recalls. Rilling hired him on the spot, and three hours later, he was walking onstage at Carnegie Hall to sing with the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

It was a breakthrough moment for Phan. "I'd never done anything like that," he says. "I didn't know I could perform under pressure." He must have done well — Rilling has been calling his number ever since, including a last minute fill in (on a relatively leisurely two-week notice) at last year's Oregon Bach Festival.

The spotlight at this year's Bach Festival will deservedly fall primarily on retiring founding music director Rilling, who has contributed so much to Oregon music over the

past 40-plus years. But Phan will be almost as prominent, headlining in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Bach's *B Minor Mass* and *St. John Passion*, Mendelssohn's *Psalm 95*, and a concert of vocal chamber music.

Still safely under age 35, Phan is one of the hottest singers in classical music, and the variety of his OBF appearances mirror the unusual diversity of his still young career. A rare rising star in both the concert and opera worlds, Phan appeared with most of the country's top orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony and San Francisco Symphony, recorded four albums and worked with conductors as diverse as British period instrument specialists Harry Bicket and Nicholas McGegan and arch-modernist Pierre Boulez. And he's performed with some of the world's leading opera companies, including Seattle, LA, Houston, New York City and Frankfurt.

Amid all his peregrinations, Phan has a special affinity for Oregon. Phan recently blogged (wkly.ws/1i0) about his love for the city of Portland and its coffee, laid-back atmosphere and natural beauty. "I have a real fondness for Oregon," he says. "The state is beautiful, and I love the coffee, the wine, the food and the people."

The feeling is mutual, because along with his OBF appearances, Phan has been invited to appear for the second straight summer at Portland's annual summer Chamber Music Northwest festival. That's on top of his May appearances with Portland Opera, where last



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month he filled in ably in a major role after a cast member was injured in rehearsal for Verdi's *Falstaff*. He's also sung with PO in Rossini's *Barber of Seville* and with the Oregon Symphony in *Carmina Burana*.

As successful as he's been in orchestral and operatic settings, the Michigan-born, New York-based singer equally treasures what he calls "vocal chamber music" and others term (somewhat pretentiously) "art music." But in the U.S., the rise of popular music and its more "natural" singing styles (from Broadway to blues to indie rock to hip hop) has often made classical music featuring a singer and pianist or small chamber ensemble sound hoity-toity. Not Phan, though, whose vocal warmth and astonishing ability to connect with audiences have won him wide acclaim and such star piano partners as Mitsuko Uchida, Richard Goode and Jeremy Denk. He even founded the Collaborative Arts Institute of Chicago to promote the teaching, performance and development of vocal chamber music.

The chamber music Phan most treasures is Benjamin Britten's, which he'll perform on July 1, along with arias from Britten operas on July 2. Initially fascinated by England's greatest 20th-century composer because of his role as a (closeted) gay classical music pioneer who wrote so much great music for his life partner, Peter Pears, Phan grew to admire the composer's "perfect balance between head and heart. There's his technical virtuosity — everything is put together perfectly — but at the same time, everything serves an expressive purpose about love, war, loss of innocence, feeling like an outsider, anything you can ponder for the rest of your life," Phan explains. "These are things we all grapple with. He's a masterful storyteller. There's just something about the way he arranges things that lifts the music off the page."

'Beall is so intimate — it's a perfect little jewel box. We're close to the audience, and the audience feels close to us.'

— NICHOLAS PHAN, OPERA SINGER

In Pears, Phan sees a model for his own variegated career, so rare in this era of singers who specialize in only one kind of classical singing. "It might sound radical now but to my mind it's really conservative. Peter Pears did a Bach evangelist, Britten's music, Schubert songs, he's in *Turandot*. He did everything."

Phan released an album of Britten's music last year in anticipation of the composer's centenary this year, and he's especially looking forward to singing it in the crystal-clear acoustics at the UO's Beall Concert Hall. "Beall is so intimate — it's a perfect little jewel box," he says. "We're close to the audience, and the audience feels close to us. In that intimate setting, there's the possibility of people experiencing the music in great nuance and detail. They can see the beautiful trees, not just the beautiful forest."

Most of all, though, he's excited about working with a conductor who put so much trust in him at a turning point in his career. "I'm really honored to be a part of Helmuth's last festival as music director," Phan says. "He's one of the deepest musicians I've ever worked with. He's so heartfelt in the way he approaches music. He's inspiring. It's an exciting opportunity to stand on stage singing the *St. John Passion* with someone who's been conducting it longer than been alive. There's so much to be learned from that. It's a special occasion and I'm really looking forward to sharing that with him."

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Composers Symposium



CRAIG HELLA JOHNSON

So many classical music festivals are mired in the past, as though composers somehow stopped writing music after the 19th century ended. If the people of Bach's time had that regressive attitude, we wouldn't have his music around today. Fortunately for us, UO music composition professor Robert Kyr has for many years contributed a contemporary component to the Bach Festival via the biennial Composers Symposium, which gives emerging composers a similar opportunity as that afforded the festival's choral conducting students: the chance to develop their chops under the guidance of seasoned pros. This year's symposium will produce more than 30 world premieres by young composers who'll be mentored by some of America's finest musicians:

OBF2013 OREGON BACH FESTIVAL SCHEDULE & HIGHLIGHTS!

Here's a quick overview of major Oregon Bach Festival concerts this summer at UO's Beall Concert Hall, the Central Lutheran Church and the Hult Center's Silva Concert Hall and Soreng Theater. The festival boasts many other performances, films, talks, master classes and other events; check oregonbachfestival.com for complete event listings.



FRIDAY, 6/28

Missa Solemnis

Many historians regard Beethoven's choral orchestral masterpiece as the equal of his symphonies in power and scope. Silva, \$15-\$49.

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SUNDAY, 6/30

Bach's Circle

The LA-based ensemble, led by the superb oboist and Bach Fest vet Alan Vogel, plays a wide range of Baroque music by their

namesake, Couperin, Vivaldi and Fasch. Beall, \$15-\$49.

7/1, 7/3, 7/5, 7/8 LECTURES 7/10 PERFORMANCE

Discovery Series

Rilling's acclaimed lecture demonstrations featuring festival participants are devoted to J.S. Bach's great *St. John Passion*

CHEE YUN JOINS PIANIST
JEFFREY KAHANE MONDAY,
7/8, FOR A BEETHOVEN PIANO
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LOOKING FORWARD AND BACH

• Craig Hella Johnson, the Austin-based director of the world-renowned Conspirare Company of Voices, which has premiered some of Kyr's finest works as well as that of other major composers

• Fireworks Ensemble, founded by UO music grad Brian Coughlin in 2000, the New York-based amplified chamber band that covers everything from Stravinsky (an electric "Rite of Spring") to Zappa to techno to cartoon music to originals, and provides an example to today's students of how to create a career in new music

• Beta Collide, the ensemble founded by UO faculty members Brian McWhorter and Molly Barth, who are among the finest players in the world on trumpet and flute, respectively, is dedicated to contemporary music by some of today's top composers

• Stephen Hartke, the prize-winning LA-based composer whose eclectic music draws on various world music and other wide-ranging influences

The symposium's American Creators Ensemble will perform the premieres and other new music in concerts on July 2 (choral), 5, 6 and 7 (instrumental music). In a festival primarily devoted to music of the distant past, the Composers Symposium provides listeners excellent opportunities to hear the music of today and tomorrow.

— Brett Campbell



FIREWORKS ENSEMBLE



MATTHEW HALLS LEADS THE OBF ORCHESTRA AND SINGER TAMARA WILSON ON TUESDAY, 7/2, IN EXCERPTS FROM OPERAS BY BRITTEN, WAGNER, VERDI AND MORE AT SILVA

FRIDAY, 7/12

Portland Baroque Orchestra

Maybe the top recommendation of the festival, this superb concert features Halls on harpsichord and one of the nation's top period instrument orchestras — really an assemblage of all stars who live all around the country — playing a terrific all-Bach program of concertos, an orchestral suite and more, in the manner closest to the way the composer intended. Beall, \$15-\$49.

SATURDAY, 7/13

Hohenstaufen Quartet

Rilling's daughters comprise half the lineup, which will play two of the most popular Romantic era string quartets: Schubert's "Rosamunda" and Dvorak's "American." Beall, \$15-\$49.

SUNDAY, 7/14

Bach B Minor Mass

The festival and Rilling's career as music director conclude with perhaps the greatest work written by history's greatest composer, led by maybe its most experienced interpreter, Rilling. Silva, \$15-\$62.

this year, culminating in a July 10 performance of this controversial choral-orchestral masterpiece at Beall. Lectures: Soreng, \$10/\$17; performance: Beall, sold out.

MONDAY, 7/1

Anniversary Soirée

Four fine vocal soloists, including Nicholas Phan, join some OBF musicians, Robert Levin and more in music by Poulenc, Britten and others. Beall, \$15-\$49.

TUESDAY, 7/2

A Night at the Opera

For listeners who want to venture beyond Bach and

Baroque, Matthew Halls leads the OBF orchestra and singer Tamara Wilson in excerpts from operas by Britten, Wagner, Verdi and more. Silva, \$15-\$49.

WEDNESDAY, 7/3

Verdi & Wagner Transcribed

In this bicentenary tribute to one of history's most controversial and important composer-pianists, Ya-Fei Chuang and Robert Levin (the latter also one of classical music's expert explainers) play transcriptions of Wagner-influenced music originally written for larger forces by Faure, Chabrier, Liszt and Verdi, along with Wagner himself. Beall, \$15-\$49.

FRIDAY, 7/5

Paul Jacobs

In this recital, the great organist plays some of Bach's most essential music. Central Lutheran Church, \$21 adv., \$28 door.

SATURDAY, 7/6

Passing of the Baton

OBF founder Helmuth Rilling and his successor, Matthew Halls, conduct the orchestra and vocal soloists in music by Brahms and Mendelssohn. Silva, \$15-\$62.

MONDAY, 7/8

Jeffrey Kahane & Chee-Yun

The orchestra plays one of Haydn's great London symphonies, and the veteran OBF piano star and acclaimed violinist join the orchestra for a Beethoven piano concerto and a Mozart violin concerto. Silva, \$15-\$62.

THURSDAY, 7/11

Jeffrey Kahane

In this solo recital, the superb pianist plays Chopin, Schumann and music by his son, the indie classical composer-songwriter Gabriel Kahane. Plus Bach, of course. Beall, \$15-\$49.

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